



## MEMORANDUM

TO: Board of Park Commissioners  
FROM: Dan Johnson  
DATE: September 15, 2015  
SUBJECT: Drones in Parks

### **Requested Board Action**

No formal action is requested. This is an opportunity for the Commissioners to be briefed on existing Parks policy regarding drone usage in Seattle Parks.

### **Background**

“Drone” is the most common term for an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). Drones are remote-controlled aircrafts that are capable of carrying ancillary equipment such as cameras. In recent years, technological advances and declining prices have led to the increasing popularity of drone usage in the general population. In the spring and summer of 2015, use of these devices in our parks has proliferated. Parks staff have been experiencing a higher volume of questions about drone use in parks, as well as observing a greater frequency of drone use by park visitors. As would be expected, increased drone usage has also increased complaints regarding drones.

### **Policy Description**

Seattle Municipal Code (18.12.265) prohibits the use of drones in parks, stating that “It is unlawful to operate any motorized model aircraft or motorized model watercraft in any park except at places set apart by the Superintendent for such purposes.” No such set-apart place has been established. Enforcement of the prohibition is challenging not only because Parks does not have any staff or resources budgeted for this purpose but also because the bulk of drone use occurs in the late afternoon and early evening, when the parks are not staffed. Additionally, a park visitor who is using a drone and receives a warning for doing so can merely move out of sight of the staff member who issued the warning and continue flying.

### **Issues**

Parks staff is concerned about the safety risks that drones pose. Park spaces are very appealing for a novice drone pilot to hone their flying skills, providing open spaces and beautiful views for novice and experienced drone pilots alike. We have heard from many park visitors that flight paths can be erratic, with drones often flying uncomfortably low or fast. Most complaints revolve around safety issues, as well as the high pitched noise that drones emit. We have seen these behaviors in the past

with model airplanes, and as expected, the major concerns tapered off dramatically after the novelty of the planes wore off.

The use of drones in parks has possible impacts to wildlife. Beginning last year, staff began to receive complaints about park visitors using drones at Commodore Park's Great Blue Heron rookery and osprey nesting platform. Drones have the ability to obtain dramatic footage of bird behavior and of chicks in their nests, but at what cost to the sanctity of the bird's habitat? Staff placed signage calling attention to the drone prohibition, which remains on site.

Drones in parks also compromise the privacy of parks visitors. Although people should have a reduced expectation of privacy in public places, drones are sophisticated enough to record a conversation from a distance at which those conversing cannot see the drone, as well as take professional quality videos and pictures. Public sensitivity around issues of surveillance or perceived surveillance has also increased in recent years, and Parks would like for visitors to feel that they may enjoy our parks and natural areas without having to worry that their words, images, and actions could later be shared or broadcast without their consent.

### **Policies in other jurisdictions**

The State of California recently passed laws prohibiting the recording by drones of people's images or voices unless permission had been granted to make such a recording.

Long Beach, NJ last month banned the use of drones below an altitude of 400 feet, due in part to privacy issues and in part to concerns that rogue gusts of wind could turn a drone into a projectile.

The National Park Service is working to ban drones in all of its parks and cites drone operators' documented harassment of wildlife as a driver of the rules under development.

Seattle Parks and Recreation is aware that Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) has undertaken research into how consumer-level drone use could pose a risk to watershed security.

### **Steps we are taking to minimize conflicts between drones and Park Users**

We are exploring the possibility of a sanctioned drone area in our park system. The SMC language would permit the use of drones in a designated area at a designated time. Some municipalities have embraced this circumscribed approach. For instance, the New Castle County (Delaware) Ice Cream festival, held at the end of June, featured a public "drone zone" with screens set up to show footage taken from overhead.

Seattle Parks and Recreation will work with the Seattle Police Department to help ensure that their field officers are knowledgeable about the SMC prohibition against drones, model planes, and other UAVs in city parks.

### **Additional Information**

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